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History Reclaimed: Sister Betty Ann McNeil, D.C., tells the hidden story of the Daughters of Charity during the Civil War

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HISTORY RECLAIMED



Sister Betty Ann McNeil, D.C., tells the hidden story of
the Daughters of Charity during the Civil War. *By Jamie Sokolik*

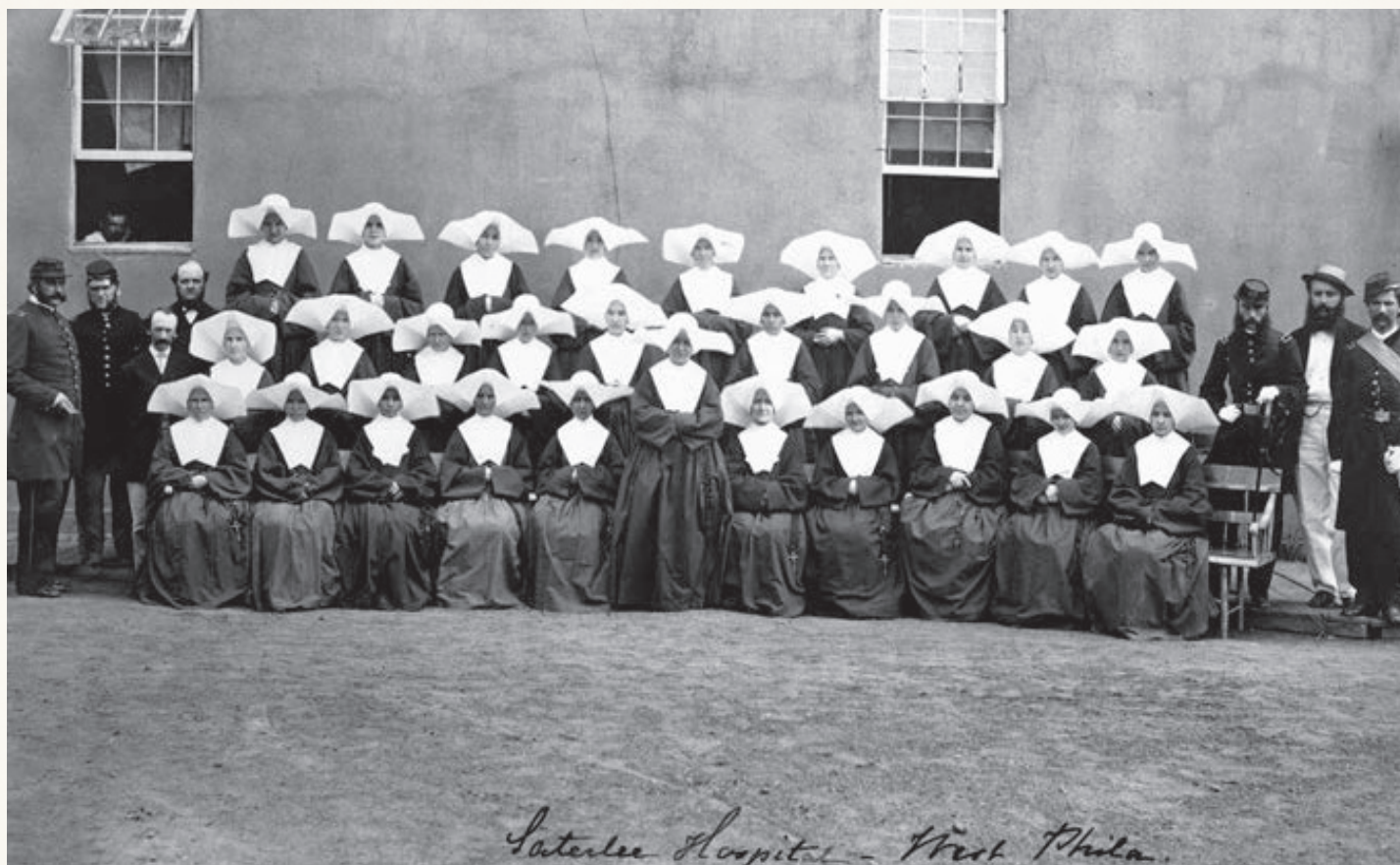


Image courtesy of the Library of Congress

Treasure maps can take many different forms, but they don't always lead to gold coins or precious gems. For Sister Betty Ann McNeil, D.C., author of *"Balm of Hope: Charity Afire Impels Daughters of Charity to Civil War Nursing,"* her map came in the

form of a small notation on the inside front cover of an old and tattered book she discovered while serving as the archivist for the Daughters of Charity, Province of Emmitsburg, Md. Upon reading the looping scrawl, she instantly recognized its value.

“One day, back in the stacks, as they say, I pulled down something that I hadn’t noticed before,” she says. “It looked like a memory book someone might paste together. I opened it, and there was a note from some dear secretary, or maybe she was just a very wise woman. It read, ‘This collection is valuable for it gives names which have been suppressed in later transcriptions. And are for the greater number, the original notes sent in response to Father Burlando’s requirement—unretrenched—unvarnished.’ As soon as I read it, I knew this wasn’t just any book.”

She was right. McNeil was in possession of memoirs and a previously unknown account of the Daughters of Charity’s involvement during the Civil War. Some of the names, places and facts were familiar, but other names, locations and stories were completely new. She soon realized that the conventional knowledge was a somewhat watered-down version of the entries found in the book she now held.

“It’s vitally important to me that I tell the story of the Daughters of Charity—a truly Vincentian story,” she says. “What the Province had previously been calling *Civil War Annals* turned out to be a synthesis and redaction of the original. St. Vincent always gets his due credit, but the reality is that it was Louise de Marillac who was behind him, pushing him every step of the way. That’s not often recognized. Women in history don’t always get the full recognition they deserve. I decided it had to be published.”

During the next 15 years, McNeil worked to transcribe and annotate each page while still fulfilling her duties as archivist. When offered the opportunity to do research and writing at DePaul, she eagerly accepted. Her position as Vincentian Scholar-in-Residence enabled her to finish the book. “*Balm of Hope*” was published in September 2015.

“One thing I very deliberately did was to try to identify every sister who is mentioned in the book,” she says. “In this way, it serves as a resource for people who have a genealogical interest. We’ve actually had a few people contact us about relatives they’ve discovered. It’s also a resource for students to study the humanity and human suffering of the war rather than the military strategies. That’s in addition to educating about the critical role the Catholic sisters played as nurses during the war.”

As McNeil enthusiastically but sadly points out, though the stories in “*Balm of Hope*” tell of occurrences from long ago, the lessons and takeaways are easily applicable to the events of today. She believes that the sisters’ dedication to serve everyone without question helped to start the process of breaking down prejudices.

“The Daughters of Charity led by example throughout the war,” she says. “If today we could learn from their example—that every person is valuable and requires respect and has human dignity—we wouldn’t have some of the cultural issues that the country is currently struggling with, in my opinion. Respect is universal. Caring is universal. The sisters were able to demonstrate this and provide a serene presence and unconditional acceptance in the face of incredible bigotry and divisiveness. They showed such heroism, courage and devotion to duty in the midst of terrible chaos and violence.”



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ST. FRANCIS XAVIER
CATHOLIC CHURCH HOSPITAL,
GETTYSBURG, PENN.

As soon as the head Surgeon saw us, he took us to the ladies who had volunteered their services and to the men nurses, saying to them: 'Ladies and men nurses, here are the Sisters of Charity, who will give all the directions, you are only desired to obey.' They bowed assent—Gettysburg, with all this section of [the] country were bigoted against our holy religion—but bitterness had now lost its edge, and modesty might have blushed at the welcomes and encomiums that hailed us in the streets as we passed to and fro.

Everywhere the sufferers seemed to think our presence smoothed the barb of pain and anguish ... A middle aged gentleman having come from Philadelphia to seek a fallen friend, enters the Hospital just as a Sister was giving this poor man drink. The stranger stood for a while, then exclaimed loud and emphatically: 'May God bless the Sisters of Charity!' This he repeated 3 times, then added, 'I am a Protestant, but may God bless the Sisters of Charity who thus care for our poor men.'

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~~Gettysburg~~ Gettysburg, Pa
On the 1st of July, 1863, the two Armies met in
Gettysburg, a large Town, in Pa, about Ten miles
North of Emmittsburg. They fought until the e-
ing of the 3rd, advancing by their movements in
and more towards our peaceful Vale, so that
our buildings & very earth trembled from the
Cannon. That night the rain fell heavily & con-
tinued thro' all next day. (Saturday) —
On Sunday morning, immediately after
Mass, Rev. Father Burlando, with twelve Sisters
started for the Battle field, taking refreshments
bandages, Sponges, clothing &c. intending to do
what we could for the wounded.

Image courtesy of Daughters of Charity Province
of St. Louise Archives, Emmittsburg, Md.



*DR. WILLIAMS TOLD SISTER ROSE
IN THE YARD OF THE HOSPITAL
SATURDAY EVENING, THAT NEXT
MORNING AT FOUR, GENERAL LEE
WOULD SURRENDER.*

POINT LOOKOUT, MD.

On the 14th of July, 1862, our Revd. Father Burlando, with 25 sisters, left Baltimore and after 24 hours sail, reached this Hospital Encampment ... One of our band had contracted typhoid fever on the Transport Boat, and was now called to her early reward.

She gave up her whole being, as generously as she had offered her zealous labors ... Our dear Sister ... received the Sacraments of Penance and Communion a day or two previous to her death, tho' no danger was then apparent. The priest being stationed 12 miles distant, could not reach us in time after her symptoms alarmed us; arriving there only in time to perform the burial service. Our dear Sister was honored by every effort of the kind Doctors and Officers, they being Pall Bearers. All the Soldiers who had been buried, had only a sheet wrapped around them, having no lumber for coffins, but for our dear Sister a white pine coffin was gotten. The Authorities walked in procession, the Soldiers playing a dead march. There on the bank of the Potomac, rested the worn-out Sister of Charity, but the prayers of our holy church consecrated the spot, by the ministry of one of her faithful sons. A martyr of Charity had become the base of that new mission.

WARRINGTON, FLA.

One morning at the hour of one we were aroused by loud and repeated knocks, it was the Chaplain come to tell us to pack, and then he would celebrate Mass before day[break]. Our troops had made an attack and it was expected the enemy would open fire as soon as it was day. We were in great suspense on account of our poor sick, as all their guns were pointed directly at the hospital, but it was deferred owing to their force being weakened by the attack ... We were merely settled when to our astonishment they opened fire on the hospital without the least warning. Our good Father

being away, our first thought was the tabernacle. Two Sisters removed it to some distance from the danger; one remained to guard it and the rest went to assist in removing the sick. Three balls passed through the hospital and one through the clothes room where one of the sisters was engaged in removing the linen, but it respected her holy habit and turned to one side. It was miraculous as it was such an immense ball and was sufficient to have torn the room to pieces. Now once more we had to take refuge in the woods and where we remained until the evacuation in March.

RECOLLECTIONS OF SISTER MATILDA COSKERY, HARPERS FERRY, VA.

... the Lady of the house came in and said: 'My poor dear Sisters, the wagon is at the door with your baggage ready to take you to the cars' ... With the wagon we found our worthy Pastor ... placed among strangers, privations, etc., as we were. A farm wagon with two Negro men to drive it; the wagon had no cover, and no seats but our trunks. The night was dark, except between the broken clouds. Here and there a bright star and a half-moon that was dimmed also by the misty spray from the two Rivers formed by the dashing waves over the many pointed rocks that rose in their beds.

At every short distance a sentinel would ask for our Counter-sign which the good Pastor gave them ... an officer met us with on our leaving the wagon. He told us to follow him, that he thought he could procure a shelter from the damp night in a hut on the side of the river. We walked carefully for a good distance on two boards raised

high up—crossing water on one side but too dark to see on the other ... No lights were used, lest the ambushed enemy would fire on us. At last we found a little cabin that the poor people opened at the request of the officer. They, like ourselves, were waiting for the cars to take them away from the Enemy, who, it was said were only 10 miles distant; all that saved us was the destruction of the Bridge, little canoes, etc. Here then we sat resting our arms or heads on the end of our umbrellas, till 4 in the morning. Then what a scene! Except the car we were in, which was almost filled with women and children flying to some place of safety. The other cars were without tops so as to put all kinds of things on it: beds, tents, sick men etc., etc., etc. When they would stop for water or fuel, we would hear the distress of the suffering men. We were 5 hours going, where, usually, 2 were sufficient.



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FALL OF RICHMOND, VA.

Dr. [Thomas] Williams told Sister Rose [Noyland] in the yard of the Hospital Saturday evening, that next morning at four, General [Robert E.] Lee would surrender. While speaking to her they were under the eyes of officers and men who watched every motion.

On Sunday the news was confirmed.

[The] Yankees came in[to Richmond] on Monday [April 3, 1865].

... There were forty Louisianans suffering terribly down in the Swamp at Camp Jackson. The Ladies went to Mrs. Lee, and at the General's suggestion Sister Rose was sent for. Mrs. Lee was at that time very infirm, and confined to the house. She apologized for sending for Sister giving her infirmities as excuse.